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## Decentralisation and the Centre Right in the UK and Spain:

### Central Power and Regional Responsibility

*Abstract:* The British Conservative Party and the Spanish Partido Popular have been hostile, at least at times, to devolving greater power to regions. Although both parties might be expected to support decentralisation on economically liberal grounds, in fact both have found it extremely difficult to reconcile their centre-right economic instincts with a deeply ingrained commitment to the integrity of the state. This paper explores the tension in conservative and liberal ideology between supporting sub-state political responsibility through decentralisation and supporting strong central government able to take long-term (and potentially unpopular) decisions in times of economic crisis. We examine these two parties in light of Toubeau and Wagner's (2015) framework, finding that market liberalism can be interpreted differently when it comes to decentralisation: both the Partido Popular and the Conservative Party have both at different times used economic justifications for a strong central state. The Partido Popular continues to hold a conservative view of decentralisation and the Conservatives have only recently started to link their market liberalism to a justification for decentralisation. Thus, whilst it is possible to construct a liberal economic case for devolving power away from the central state, one does not necessarily follow the other.

Statewide political parties in decentralised states face difficult choices when it comes to supporting further devolution. They must balance their belief in the integrity of the state with the potential electoral costs of being seen to be against a region's aspirations (Meguid 2010). However, beyond immediate political considerations, parties will also assess how far decentralisation fits with their wider ideological biases (Toubeau and Massetti 2013: 302). In their large-scale study, Toubeau and Wagner (2015) find that parties' positions on decentralisation depend on their ideology. Generally, parties on the economic right are more supportive of decentralisation than parties on the economic left and culturally liberal parties are more supportive of decentralisation than culturally conservative parties. However, crucially, they also note that parties in Western Europe rarely present such a neat ideological package. Thus, for instance, economically liberal but culturally conservative parties might find themselves torn between reluctance to change and the potential economic benefits of decentralisation. In this context, Toubeau and Wagner (2015: 115) suggest that 'further research should investigate in detail the internal rifts that these contradictory ideological motivations may cause and how they are managed by individual statewide parties'.

We take up this challenge and explore in detail the philosophical tensions about decentralisation in two centre-right parties: the British Conservative Party and the Spanish Partido Popular (PP), which can be translated as the 'party of the people'. Our case study approach allows us to add a temporal dimension to the study of these parties' ideology. Both parties have found it difficult to reconcile ideology and territorial management. Toubeau and Wagner (2015) hypothesise that centre-right parties will support decentralisation on the ideological grounds that it will shrink the state (actually, the size of the central government), citing the ideology of the German

Free Democrats and US Republicans (Toubeau and Wagner 2015: 100) and the examples of Swiss and German fiscal equalisation reforms (Toubeau and Wagner 2015: 102). In practice, the Conservatives and the PP initially opposed decentralisation because they feared that such a move would exacerbate, not ameliorate, existing divisions within the UK and Spain. While both parties have since come to accept decentralisation, the Conservatives have recently gone further, arguing for greater decentralisation across the whole of the UK in order to reduce the size of the British state and promote fiscal responsibility. The PP, however, has moved to re-centralise Spain, arguing that the lack of fiscal responsibility on the part of the regional governments has forced the central government, at a time of economic crisis, to take such action.

Our examples of centre-right parties in the UK and Spain, countries that have grappled with the demands of sub-state national minorities in recent decades, reveal the ideological tension between liberalism and conservatism that exists inside parties labelled by Toubeau and Wagner as ‘culturally conservative’ (2015: 99). Our comparison illustrates more generally the priority that centre-right parties attach to strong central government and the challenge posed to the unitary state by sub-state national minorities who seek greater autonomy or secession for their regions. The tensions present in some multinational states may be exacerbated during tough economic times when governments may be required to take unpopular economic decisions, times when the central government may seek to assert its need for strong powers, which centre-right parties, perhaps more than parties of the left, will insist upon.

We argue that while Toubeau and Wagner are correct to point to the importance of ideology when trying to understand the party policy, we must also

consider carefully how centre-right parties interpret their commitment to market liberalism and conservatism. Parties on the economic right may be generally more likely to support decentralisation, but we find that these two right-wing parties have at different times been content to argue for a strong central state as the only means by which market liberal policies can be effectively delivered.

The paper begins by outlining an analytical framework for viewing the philosophical influences on political parties' territorial stances. After an overview of how the decentralisation of power happened in the UK and Spain, it then examines the centre right in detail, outlining the tensions in both parties between liberal and conservative ideologies. We go on to consider how the Conservative Party and the PP, when dealing with the challenges of decentralisation in the UK and Spain, have confronted sub-state nationalism and how they have tried to promote fiscal responsibility, an issue that has become more prominent since the recent economic crisis affecting both countries. We discuss specific tensions in both parties and examine how the parties have managed the ideological tensions surrounding decentralisation. Understanding these motivations is especially important in the context of the Scottish independence referendum and Catalonia's recent moves towards secession or greater autonomy. We acknowledge that other factors (including party competition and organisation) will play a role in determining party positions on decentralisation, but we focus here on party ideology.

Our examination of the responses of the Conservatives and the PP to the challenges of sub-state nationalism and economic crisis reveals that the Conservatives have embraced liberalism to a greater extent than their Spanish counterparts in the PP, with the Conservatives retaining many of the liberal policies pioneered in the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher. This perspective of wanting to reduce the size of the state has

helped shape its current policy on Scottish devolution, in which the Conservatives have sought to promote fiscal responsibility at the Scottish Parliament by actually expanding the body's tax powers to keep more of the revenue raised in Scotland within that sub-state nation. The PP, on the other hand, is responding to economic crisis by preferring to re-centralise Spain, at least as far as the country's finances are concerned, citing fiscal irresponsibility on the part of regional governments. Thus, there is not necessarily a tension for centre-right parties between market liberalism and lack of support for decentralisation.

### **Analytical framework: Conservatism and liberalism**

Toubeau and Wagner (2015: 115) note that 'culturally conservative parties on the economic right [can be] divided between economic efficiency and nationalism.' In the cases of the PP and the Conservative Party, we reframe this as a potential tension between liberalism and conservatism. Neither the British Conservative Party nor the Spanish PP can be described as purely 'culturally' conservative parties in a philosophical sense. Rather, they contain elements of both liberalism and conservatism. These two traditions (present in most parties of the centre right) may suggest different logics of action when it comes to supporting or opposing decentralisation. For the market liberal, sub-state responsibility might promote competition, limits on central government power and efficiency; Toubeau and Wagner point to this desire for efficiency when developing their hypothesis 'The more economically right wing a party is, the more it will support decentralization' (2015: 101), and others have noted the appearance of an economic discourse in the literature on decentralisation in recent years (Rodríguez-Pose and Sandall 2008: 58-59). For the conservative, such potential benefits have to be weighed against the

accumulated wisdom of present arrangements, scepticism about change and a concern to preserve central government authority.

This could, therefore, be a key ideological tension on the centre right when it comes to decentralisation. This section explores this dualism in both parties. We present a framework for analysing the potential ideological motivations of the Conservatives and the PP according to: (1) ideology and the state; (2) ideology and the economy; and (3) ideology and decentralisation.

### *1. Centre-right ideology and the state*

Girvin sees conservatism as an ‘attempt to justify what exists and to challenge the advocates of change’ (1994: 4). For Green (2002: 281), there are three fundamental elements of conservatism: intellectual imperfection, traditionalism and organicism. Conservatives reject the idea that societies or constitutions can be perfected and are highly sceptical about grand plans to improve them or change people’s behaviour. In general, they will always prefer the present level of (necessarily imperfect) happiness or utility to a hypothetical and untested higher level that any innovation claims to offer. This is also rooted in a belief in the (often unseen) wisdom of inherited practice. Institutions and traditions are greater than their surface level appearance might suggest: in fact, they contain an essential wisdom that has been distilled over time. However, this wisdom (and the stability in society which flows from it) is a both a precious and precarious gift. For Burke, it is a covenant to be preserved from generation to generation, including for those who have yet to be born (Norman 2013). The delicate ecosystem of institutions and practice is hard won but easily lost. Change must thus be organic and go with the grain of existing practices and traditions.

Thus, writing about a British Conservative context, O'Hara (2011) distils two central principles for conservative thought: the knowledge principle and the change principle. The knowledge principle captures a conservative's scepticism about what we can know. Knowledge is local and it is contingent. A conservative rejects the idea that theories about how societies work can hold across different times and contexts (O'Hara 2011: 33). This limited knowledge leads naturally to the change principle: if we have only an extremely limited understanding of the consequences of change, then we should be extremely cautious when considering it.

## *2. Centre-right ideology and the economy*

Alongside this conservatism, however, both parties contain strong elements of liberalism. For Greenleaf (1983: 193), for instance, there is a dualism in British Conservatism between economic liberals and conservative paternalists. Similarly, among the 2008 party manifesto's statement of principles, the PP speaks of its links to the tradition of Spanish liberalism arising from the 1812 Constitution of Cádiz and cites its commitment to a free-market economy, though one with policies that 'make prosperity more just' (Partido Popular 2008: 8-9). Liberalism emphasises the primacy of the individual over the state. Girvin further identifies liberalism with egalitarianism and the 'universalist commitment to the moral unity of the human species, and the possibility of improvement and progress' (1994: 13). Seeing conservatism as the 'outgrowth of conflict with liberalism', Girvin argues that 'It is the values of the new society, usually described as liberal, which the right and conservatives generally wish to transform, change or destroy' (1994: 14).

In this way, for some authors, liberalism and conservatism can co-exist together coherently (see, for instance, Willetts 1992: 92-108; Greenleaf 1983; Freedman



1996: 348-393). Others see clear tensions. O'Hara (2011: 218-219), for instance, notes two central sources of disagreement. First, following her sceptical view of knowledge, the conservative believes that there is no way of knowing the optimal system for running an economy; for the liberal, the best way is the free market. The liberal view also applies in the market of ideas and traditions: if people are free to follow traditions and ideas and choose to do so, then they will survive. If not, they will rightly cease. The conservative, on the other hand, believes that an invisible hand beyond the market needs to guide society. Second, while the liberal is content to allow the market to weigh the costs of change and the benefits of innovation, a conservative is concerned that markets may neglect what is important and trample on the wisdom contained in tradition.

### *3. Centre-right ideology and decentralisation*

Conservatism does not naturally predispose those on the centre right to reject decentralisation. On the contrary, local knowledge is extremely important for a conservative (O'Hara 2011: 33). A conservative would also generally welcome localism, so that decisions are taken closer to the people they affect (O'Hara 2011: 142). However, a conservative might reject any move towards greater decentralisation within a state on the grounds that the change is too radical and interferes with long-established governing practices. The imposition, for instance, of a tier of government with no historical or cultural basis purely for administrative convenience would be difficult for a conservative to accept. However, if decentralisation moved with the grain of generally established practice and became demanded from the bottom up, then it might be justified as organic and necessary.

European liberals have been in conflict with conservatives over sub-state nationalism, having been associated with a ‘commitment to liberation and self-determination’ for minorities in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Girvin 1994: 50). Liberals also clashed with conservatives over the extension of the franchise and basic social reforms during this time period, supporting change, but once this was achieved (about the 1920s in Europe), liberals tended to side with conservatives when it came to the larger question of redistribution (Girvin 1994: 71). For liberals, the advantages of greater decentralisation are clearer. Devolution of greater fiscal responsibility, for instance, might promote the kind of tax competition that will lower rates. Both conservatives and liberals could agree with the idea that forcing lower tiers of government to raise the taxes they spend could foster greater political responsibility.

Our analytical framework for examining the ideology of these two parties is summarised in Table 1 below. However, before we examine each party’s response to these ideological tensions, we first look briefly at the history of decentralisation in the UK and Spain.

Table 1 about here

### **Decentralisation in the UK and Spain**

In examining the cases of the UK and Spain, we are interested in the intersection between pressures for decentralisation and existing party institutions and ideology. Our investigation of devolution in the UK and Spain uses similar cases of decentralisation (with some exceptions), focusing on two similar parties of the centre right. This approach is consistent with the ‘most similar systems’ design (Przeworski and Teune 1970) or the ‘comparable-cases strategy’ (Lijphart 1975). Both the UK and Spain have moved from being highly centralised states to being at least somewhat

decentralised in asymmetrical ways. Our case study approach gives us the scope to examine how ideological motivations may have changed over time, ending up with different outcomes: while the Conservatives initially oppose decentralisation but later come to embrace it, the PP remains more concerned about the integrity of state and committed to centralisation.

In the UK, Northern Ireland was granted devolution of power after the independence of the rest of Ireland in the 1920s, but devolution was suspended in the early 1970s as a result of the conflict between Unionist and Nationalist communities, with a renewed attempt at devolution introduced in 1998 (Bogdanor 1999). This wave of devolution also included Scotland and Wales in 1999, as well as London in 2000, though devolution to other regions of England failed to materialise. In Spain, however, the entire territory of the state has seen devolution of power, resulting in 17 *comunidades autónomas* (autonomous communities) and two autonomous cities in Africa. According to Gunther and Montero (2009: 80), Spanish devolution ‘grants very extensive government powers and resources to sub-national units’, making ‘the autonomous communities of Spain more powerful than almost any other sub-national government structure in Europe’. Therefore, the institutional comparison between the UK and Spain is not perfect, but in both cases, decentralisation was prompted by demands from sub-state minorities and was resisted, at least to some extent, by parties of the centre right.

In the UK, devolution has largely been limited to the ‘Celtic Fringe’ of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. London has an assembly and an elected mayor, and a few other English cities have chosen elected mayors, but since the North East region of England rejected devolution in 2004, no further regional devolution has occurred. While the 1970s saw a suspension of Northern Irish devolution, the decade

also saw British politicians consider devolution as a way to deal with an increase in Scottish nationalism (Bogdanor 1999: 119). The issue proved divisive for Labour in Scotland, however, with some members of Parliament (MPs) arguing that devolution would increase the likelihood of Scottish secession. Ultimately, the UK Labour government held referendums on devolution of power to Scottish and Welsh assemblies in 1979, and both failed to pass. Labour had a chance to reflect on the issue while the Conservatives governed for the next 18 years and refused to consider the matter. Eventually Labour and the Liberal Democrats, working together with the Scottish Constitutional Convention, came up with the blueprint for Scottish devolution, overwhelmingly approved by Scottish voters in 1997 after Labour won the UK election. Devolution was also approved in Wales, but by a much closer margin, and the Good Friday Agreement paved the way for a new attempt at devolution in Northern Ireland the following year.

Devolution in the UK has been asymmetrical in terms of the powers granted to the institutions established: the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly had primary legislative powers from the outset, while the National Assembly for Wales only had secondary legislative powers until a 2011 referendum gave it primary legislative powers. The Scottish Parliament began to receive revenues from the personal income tax collected in Scotland from 2017. All three institutions, however, do have powers over policy areas like health, education, agriculture, and the environment in their respective sub-state nations, while Westminster retains power over 'high politics' UK-wide areas like defence and foreign policy, as well as macroeconomic policy and the social security system (pensions and benefits, which are uniform across the UK). Officially, Westminster remains sovereign, so it can legislate in any policy area for any part of the UK. It retains control of constitutional

matters and can alter the terms of devolution, but in practice this has occurred in consultation with the people of the sub-state nation concerned.

As Bogdanor puts it (1999: 3), devolution in the UK ‘seeks to preserve intact that central feature of the British Constitution, the supremacy of Parliament’, differing from federalism, in which ‘the authority of the central or federal government and the provincial governments is co-ordinate and shared’. Devolution in Spain, at least technically speaking, is not federal either: the Spanish constitution explicitly rules it out, saying in Section 145, ‘Under no circumstances shall a federation of Self-governing Communities be allowed’ (Spain 1978: 65). Spanish decentralisation differs from federalism in that devolution of power took place through bilateral negotiations between the Spanish state and each individual region over a period of time, in the asymmetry of devolution of power across the regions, and in the open-ended nature of the devolution process (Gunther and Montero 2009: 77). Yet most observers say that Spain’s ‘state of autonomies’ has federal attributes, with the autonomous communities in charge of many domestic policy areas. García-Cuevas Roque notes (2012: 69) that one could say ‘that the delivery of public services and benefits associated with the Welfare State is the principal assignment that has been transferred to the Autonomous Communities’.

Spanish devolution has become less asymmetrical since the initial transition to democracy, in which recognition of Spain’s diversity was a crucial part. As Gunther *et al.* (2004: 280) argue, democratisation ‘would have to be accompanied by a parallel transition from a unitary and rigidly centralized state to a decentralized political structure based upon autonomous regional governments’. While demands for autonomy were greatest among those regions with prior experience of self-government before the Spanish Civil War – the Basque Country, Catalonia, and

Galicia – and extensive powers were granted to these regions, the constitution allows all regions of Spain to have devolution of power and eventually to achieve high levels of autonomy (Gunther *et al.* 2004: 286). As Bukowski observes (1997: 95), ‘ethnic/nationalistic factors may be quite significant during the early years of the transfer of authority, but once institutional units are established at lower levels, this provides a mobilization point and incentives for developing a regional consciousness even in areas that have no historic basis for such feelings’. Therefore, while some autonomous communities do still retain greater powers than others (for example, the tax collection system used in the Basque Country and Navarre), the trend has been towards less asymmetry (Gunther *et al.* 2004: 295). The PP and the Socialists, in general, have sought to reduce asymmetry in devolution (*‘café para todos’*, or coffee for everyone), while the regionalist parties have resisted this (Keating and Wilson 2009: 540).

Spain’s PP is a much younger party than its British counterpart, the Conservative Party. Starting out as the Alianza Popular (AP) in 1976, the party (changing its name to the PP in 1989) lost elections to the Union of the Democratic Centre and later the Socialists, but in 1996 it finally won power under the leadership of José María Aznar, who had managed to move the party to the centre and improve its organisation (Astudillo and García-Guereta 2006: 400-01). The party went from running a minority government dependent upon support from regionalist parties to winning a majority in 2000, with consequences for its regional policy: not having to rely upon outside support, the PP resisted further decentralisation. The PP lost power to the Socialists in 2004, not regaining power until 2011.

The British Conservatives, on the contrary, governed the UK for most of the twentieth century, including an 18-year stretch from 1979 to 1997 in which it

benefited from divisions in the Labour Party, eventually leading to a split that created the Social Democrats who later merged with the Liberals to form what is now the Liberal Democrats. In contrast to these two left-wing parties, the Conservatives were hostile towards decentralisation, resisting calls for devolution until the party's defeat in a landslide victory for Labour in 1997. The Conservatives and the PP (when it was the AP) did not originally want devolution of power from the centre to the regions, but once it became a reality, the parties found ways to deal with the situation, as later sections will describe. Both parties have tried to protect the state from the threats of sub-state nationalism, and both have promoted the cause of fiscal responsibility.

### **Ideological tensions in the PP and the Conservative Party**

Although both exhibit similar tensions between conservatism and liberalism, the interplay between these ideologies has played out differently for the Conservatives and the PP. While the Conservative Party moved decisively in an economically liberal direction in the 1980s (and retains a dominant market liberal element of thought today), the PP has not abandoned a sense of conservatism in the economic sphere to the same extent, with increased liberalism being forced upon the party by economic necessity.

### **Conservative Party**

#### *1. The state*

Despite a clear commitment to market liberalism in the economic sphere, British Conservatism has never really fallen for a liberal agenda to reduce the power of the state. As Norton (1996: 76) points out, 'Conservatives have never rejected strong government'. Although Margaret Thatcher's economics were undoubtedly liberal, her

instincts towards the state were in many ways much more in the conservative tradition. Thus, Gamble (1994) summarises her government's attitude as a commitment to the 'free economy and the strong state'. The vast power accorded to a British Government with a parliamentary majority was required to overcome resistance in order to set the people free in the economic sphere. As Smith (1996: 148) summarises:

Institutions that challenge Parliament, even an executive-dominated one, threatened the rule of law and the will of the nation. Within Thatcherism is a deep distrust of intermediate institutions such as local government, trade unions and even the media, and so it is proper to weaken these groups. For Thatcherism, the contract of governance is between the parliamentary state and the individual.

This makes support for decentralisation difficult, even if a Thatcherite Conservative could accept longer-term arguments about tax competition and sub-state fiscal responsibility. Nevertheless, current Conservative policy on Scottish devolution calls for greater tax-raising powers to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament, something that has been quite contentious and difficult for the party to accept (Scottish Conservative Party 2014). It has taken the party over a decade to marry its liberal economic ideology with thinking about devolution. The prospect of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 forced the party (alongside the other statewide parties) to come up with ideas about the future governance of Scotland if it remained in the UK. Thus, an ambiguous position on further powers for the Scottish Parliament was no longer an option. Not only was a more powerful Scottish Parliament infinitely preferable to independence; it also became increasingly untenable for the Scottish



Conservatives to claim to be in favour of fiscal discipline and low taxes when they were not prepared to trust the Scottish Parliament to do something about it.

## *2. Economy*

The post-war Conservative Party was largely committed to an accommodation between labour and the market. From the 1950s therefore, most Conservatives accepted that ‘the state sector was to be administered, not dismantled’ (Gamble 1974: 63). This implied a rejection of *laissez faire* liberal economics and an acceptance that the state would have a significant role to play in economic management. Having initially opposed the Labour Party’s creation of the National Health Service, it came to accept it as a central part of the welfare state. However, from the 1970s, the dominant view in the Conservative Party has become much more economically liberal. Margaret Thatcher thought that the excessively interventionist state was at the heart of the UK’s economic problems and that the government had to withdraw entirely from certain areas, including industry. Green (2002: 290) suggests Margaret Thatcher’s leadership fundamentally tilted the ideological outlook of the Conservative Party towards liberalism: ‘As the Conservative Century came to an end, it seemed that even if the Conservative party had survived, Conservatism had not’. Similarly, for Garnett (2003) and Beech (2011), debates about the ideological direction of the Conservative Party after 1997 took place between competing forms of liberalism, rather than between conservatism and liberalism.

## *3. Decentralisation*

In May 2014, the Scottish Conservative Party published a report that recommended further powers be devolved to the Scottish Parliament, particularly over taxation

(Scottish Conservative Party 2014). This was generally considered to be a watershed moment for the party and marked the first time since the 1970s that it had formulated its own proposals for devolution, following on from a referendum on further devolution in Wales, in which prominent Welsh Conservatives campaigned for a Yes vote. The Scottish referendum on independence forced the party to produce a vision for Scotland if it remained in the UK. In the intervening period, the Conservatives' attitude to devolution had become increasingly strident and hostile, culminating in its campaign against the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly in referendums in 1997. Even after the devolved parliaments and assemblies were established, the party leadership still had to contend with sections of the party who were not reconciled to the permanence of the new arrangements (Convery 2013).

However, the Conservative Party was instrumental in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the creating the conditions for devolution to evolve. It established the Scottish Office in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and gradually added to its powers over the next 100 years. Indeed, in the 1940s and 1950s, the party regularly played the 'Scottish card' and accused the Labour Party of, for instance, the centralisation of control away from Scotland, particularly over governance arrangements for the newly nationalised industries (Mitchell 1990). This form of 'administrative devolution' formed the basis for the powers that the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly would eventually inherit. Conservative opposition to devolution hardened and became a mainstream position only in the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher saw it as her duty to quietly ditch the party's commitment to devolution under Ted Heath in order to provide the Scots and Welsh with benefits of Thatcherism from the centre: 'Ted had impaled the party on an extremely painful hook, from which it would be my unenviable task to set it free' (Thatcher 1993: 36).

The liberal economic tendency in British Conservatism might be expected to predispose it towards greater decentralisation. Institutions that are responsible to their electorates for the taxes they spend might have a strong incentive to lower them; competition between sub-state regions might be expected to encourage lower tax rates and greater efficiencies. However, as we have seen, Thatcher's market liberal instincts nevertheless retained a deep hostility to institutions outside the core executive. These were viewed as silos of social democratic ideology that were an obstacle to the economic liberation of the UK (Gamble 1974). The Thatcher governments had frequent disputes with local authorities and took powers to cap their tax-raising powers. The Thatcher governments also famously abolished the Greater London Council in 1986. Under John Major, devolution was presented as a threat to the unity of the UK (UK Government 1992).

Beyond the ideological considerations, this thinking also reflects a sense that the UK's problems in the 1980s were so severe that they could only be dealt with by a strong and decisive central government. New Right thinkers in the Conservative Party were deeply affected by the defeat of Edward Heath's Conservative Government at the hands of the trade unions. Central government authority was therefore central to an agenda of taking on vested interests in order to implement market liberal reforms in the economy and the public sector. In the end, the market liberalism that became mainstream policy in the Conservative Party under Thatcher and beyond never engaged seriously with the possibilities of decentralisation because these were seen as at best a distraction and at worst a hindrance to a project that required the full force of the unitary British state. The irony of setting people free in the economic sphere through the centralisation of power in the political sphere was not lost on some New

Right thinkers who worried about the excessive power of bureaucracy (Smith 1996: 149).

Devolution, therefore, from the Conservative perspective, might be better justified as an organic and bottom-up change that goes with the grain of existing British practice. It can be presented as a conservative reform. As Scottish identity became more salient in the 1970s and as the Scottish party system became more distinct, an appropriate conservative response might have been to see the need to grant some form of devolved assembly (Melding 2009). Such a position was famously declared to be the ‘settled will’ of the Scottish people in the 1990s. Moreover, this might be argued to mark the logical end point of a process that the Conservative Party had started in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by creating the Scottish Office. However, the Conservative Party instead viewed devolution as a fundamental shift in the nature of the British state. While they could readily accept further administrative devolution (more powers to the Welsh and Scottish Offices, alongside more time to discuss Welsh and Scottish issues at the Westminster Parliament), they came to see devolution as a step too far.

Viewing devolution as a revolution, rather than a conservative evolution of the British constitution, presented fundamental problems for the Conservative Party. Instead of seeing the logic of adding a democratic element to powers that were already devolved administratively, Conservatives instead became fixated on whether this would lead to the break-up of the UK and the anomalies posed by Scottish MPs being able to vote on English legislation when English MPs were unable to do likewise (the so-called ‘West Lothian Question’). The majoritarian British Political Tradition, involving strong central government (under which the Conservatives had thrived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) would be threatened (Richards 2011) and the central

doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty would potentially be undermined by devolution. Thus, neither a conservative nor a liberal case for devolution found much traction in the Conservative Party of the 1980s and 1990s.

However, alongside these ideological tensions, much baser desires were also at work. The unitary United Kingdom allowed the Conservative Party to govern Scotland and Wales without a majority in those nations. As long as the Conservative Party achieved a majority across the UK as a whole (regardless of the number of seats in won in Scotland and Wales), it could appoint Conservative ministers to the Scottish and Welsh Offices and implement Conservative policies. As Conservative support in Scotland and Wales began to decline in the 1970s, electoral considerations started to play a part in Conservative thinking about the constitution. Under devolution, it was unlikely that the Conservatives would be in government (alone or at all) in Scotland and Wales. The best way to see Conservative policies in Scotland and Wales was therefore to retain the status quo. This was a view shared not only by Conservative elites at the centre, but was also strongly held in the Scottish and Welsh Conservative Parties, and it was linked to a benevolent sense that Scotland and Wales had to be saved from themselves and needed the strong centre to take on vested interests in order to set their economies free (Mitchell and Convery 2013).

## **Partido Popular**

### *1. The state*

In Spain, manifestos from the PP and its predecessor, the AP, reveal an organic view of the state. ‘A State is the result of a historical and sociological process. For this reason, we propose an option decidedly reformist, by means of evolution, modification and preparation of the necessary laws’, declares the AP in its 1977

manifesto (Alianza Popular 1977: 23)<sup>1</sup>. On the cusp of Spain's transition to democracy, the party insists upon defending the 'unity of the homeland, as well as the recognition of the personality and autonomy of its regions' (Alianza Popular 1977: 15). The PP has maintained the AP's belief in importance of the unity of Spain, noting in its 2015 manifesto that the country's constitution would turn 40 during the next legislative session, and that 'Spain is today a great nation because we have known how to construct unity from our differences' (Partido Popular 2015: 139). The party praises the constitution for being 'the best formula for articulating unity and diversity' (Partido Popular 2015: 141).

As Verge argues, 'the historical relationship between conservatism and an organic conception of the Spanish nation leaves the PP no room for the recognition of plurinationality or institutional asymmetry, as these are considered to weaken the (Spanish) national community and the authority of the state' (2013: 331). In Spain, the centre-right has gone from outright opposition to devolution in the early years of Spanish post-Franco democratisation to presiding over a significant expansion of powers devolved from the centre to the autonomous communities in the late 1990s. This apparent change of heart did not mean that the PP accepted the arguments for decentralisation based on a recognition of the diversity of Spain, however. Instead, the PP wanted to make the autonomous communities as equal as possible, reducing the asymmetry in order to maintain the primacy of the Spanish nation.

## *2. Economy*

The PP has liberal economic tendencies, though perhaps not to the extent seen in the Conservative Party, and these have developed relatively recently, largely as a result of Aznar's efforts to bring Spain into the euro, and as a consequence of the recent

economic crisis. Under Aznar's leadership, the PP 'progressively proposed a policy mix of liberal economic policies and sustainable welfare social policies' (Astudillo and García-Guereta 2006: 411). Research into the alleged neoliberalism of the PP has concluded that while the party did reduce the size and activity of the state via privatisation, liberalisation and tax cuts, with deficit and debt reduction to satisfy European Union criteria, it did not display a 'doctrinal commitment to the neo-liberal agenda' in most of its dealings with unions or the welfare state (Astudillo and García-Guereta, 2006: 412), with both unemployment and inflation dropping and relatively peaceful labour-management relations. Aznar was no Thatcher. As Astudillo and García-Guereta argue, 'the PP expected to make its profile on economic issues distinctive by superior performance rather than by offering markedly different or specific policies', which the government hoped would earn for it 'a reputation for economic and political competence' (2006: 413).

More recently, however, the PP has shown more of an interest in liberal economic policies, perhaps as a consequence of the economic crisis that began in 2008. The party's 2011 election manifesto focuses heavily on its proposed economic policy, citing the need to improve employment levels and put the public finances in order, stating that the 'PP offers an economic policy which will permit Spaniards to be in conditions of competing successfully in the global knowledge economy' (2011: 23). The manifesto goes on to claim that the party would focus on macroeconomic stability in the context of (European) Economic and Monetary Union; competitiveness, flexibility and unity of the markets; and social and welfare mobility, with halting the structural deficit, reforming the financial sector and labour laws, and improving the business climate also cited as plans (Partido Popular 2011: 25). The party's 2015 manifesto continued along the same track, putting employment at the top

of the agenda and claiming credit for creating almost a million jobs, with the goal of 20 million Spaniards in employment by the year 2020 (Partido Popular 2015: 6). ‘The key is creating jobs. It’s jobs, jobs and more jobs’, according to the PP’s manifesto (Partido Popular 2015: 13). At the start of the government’s term in office, however, unemployment actually rose to 27 per cent as austerity measures were implemented, and the bailout of major banks led to the rise of parties like Podemos (‘we can’) as a result of public alienation from the political establishment (Muro 2015: 25).

Since its 2011-15 term in government, the PP continued to appear wedded to liberal economic policies, though the party linked economic growth to the financing of the welfare state, saying in its 2015 manifesto that ‘growth is the basis of your wellbeing’ (Partido Popular 2015: 6). The party’s manifesto also states its commitment to ensuring that all Spaniards, wherever they may reside, enjoy access to the same level and quality of public services (Partido Popular 2015: 80; 141). This position does not appear consistent with Toubreau and Wagner’s (2013: 100) assumption that economically right-wing parties are more comfortable with the inequality that may result from decentralisation than their left-wing counterparts who will prioritise redistribution over efficiency.

The economic crisis affected relations between Madrid and the autonomous communities because the Spanish government collects taxes across the state (apart from in the Basque Country and Navarre) and then funds the regional governments, which have significant expenditure needs due to the extensive services they are responsible for. Many regional governments ran up big debts, with Catalonia having one of the biggest, which hit 21% of gross domestic product in the first quarter of 2012, forcing the Catalan government to seek help from Madrid (Gardner 2012a). Spain’s severe economic problems have been exacerbating the relationship between



Madrid and the regional governments, with the Catalans particularly angry about their claim that the wealthy region, outside the special fiscal arrangement enjoyed by the Basque Country and Navarre, transfers up to ten times more per capita to the Spanish state than the wealthy Basque Country (Gardner 2012b). This perspective on the economic situation leads Catalans to reject Madrid's charges of fiscal irresponsibility. Nevertheless, critics allege that the PP government wanted to take back some powers from the autonomous communities, citing the economic crisis and Spanish state's need to bail out its regions (Gardner 2012a).

### *3. Decentralisation*

As Gunther *et al.* point out, the AP opposed devolution from the outset, but as the party came to power in some of the regional governments, its position changed, with former leader Manuel Fraga – a politician from the Franco regime who had previously been a strong opponent of devolution – becoming ‘a militant Gallego regionalist in the 1990s’ as regional head of government, ‘demanding high levels of autonomy as well as extensive transfers of both policy jurisdictions and fiscal resources from the central government’ (2004: 332-3). Another regional premier (of Castile and León), Aznar, would go on to become the party's first prime minister of Spain. Under Aznar, the PP ran a minority government from 1996 to 2000, depending upon support from regionalist parties who held the balance of power in Congress. While the PP did preside over greater devolution during its time in power, Grau Creus notes that the party appears to see a distinction between administrative decentralisation and policy-making decentralisation, with the regions' proper role consisting of carrying out the policies made in Madrid (2005: 268-9).

The PP won an absolute majority of seats in the 2000 election, leaving the party free to govern without the support of regionalist parties. Observers noted a shift in the PP's position on regional policy towards greater centralisation, as well as 'a renewed form of Spanish nationalism' (Verge 2013: 330). This shift was most apparent at the statewide level, where a manifesto study found the PP to be more pro-centralisation than the Socialists in the 2000 statewide election, though nearly all of the PP's regional branches in regional elections between 2000 and 2003 produced manifestos that were more favourable to regionalism (Maddens and Libbrecht 2009: 223). Freed by his parliamentary majority from having to work with regionalist parties seeking greater autonomy from the centre, Aznar could argue that devolution had been completed (Astudillo and García-Guereta 2006: 414). The PP lost power in 2004 but returned in late 2011 under Mariano Rajoy, winning a majority of seats and introducing 'a centralising agenda realigning the party's territorial policy with its traditional centralist and nationalist ideology' (Verge 2013: 330). The economic crisis and resulting huge debts for regional governments created an opportunity for Rajoy's PP government to respond with centralisation, saying that 'the recession required technical measures that assured "harmonization" and "rationalization" – words that peripheral nationalisms interpreted as euphemisms' (Muro 2015: 25).

Reform of the regions' statutes of autonomy, a process taking place during the early twenty-first century, presented opportunities for the PP to reveal its view on how decentralisation in Spain should evolve, showing that the party opposes special treatment or privileges, particularly when it comes to the matter of the distinctiveness of the sub-state nationalities – the term 'nation' applies only to Spain, in the PP's view. The two most contentious examples were those of the Basque Country and Catalonia, two 'historic nationalities' that had experienced regional autonomy in the

1930s and which continue to seek a great deal more autonomy than that held by other regions. This approach presented a challenge to both the PP and the Socialists, who together rejected the 2004 Basque plan for what has been described as ‘confederal model that recognised the sovereignty of the Basque Country and granted it almost total autonomy’ (Muro 2009: 456). A less radical statute proposal from Catalonia in 2005 stumbled over the issues of the wording used to describe the autonomous community (the term ‘nation’ was not allowed by Madrid) and the question of tax collection and Catalonia’s contribution to the rest of Spain (Muro 2009: 460). The PP objected strongly to the Catalan proposal, partially because of the party’s ideological opposition to asymmetry (which is somewhat less of an issue for the Socialists), and partially because of partisan electoral reasons (Keating and Wilson 2009: 543).

Another issue where the PP has demonstrated its opposition to asymmetry more recently is language policy. Autonomous communities are allowed by Section 3 of the constitution to have official languages that co-exist with Castilian Spanish, which has official status throughout Spain, with citizens having ‘the duty to know it and the right to use it’ (Spain 1978: 10). Several autonomous communities have granted official status to languages besides Castilian Spanish. The PP’s 2008 manifesto complained that ‘language cannot be converted into a factor of discrimination or a cultural barrier for restricting rights, impeding geographical mobility, or breaking the unity of the market’ (Partido Popular 2008: 38), proposing that ‘all Spaniards be guaranteed the right to use Castilian Spanish’ and ‘use and study in Castilian Spanish’ throughout the education system (Partido Popular 2008: 39). Aznar gave a speech on this topic at Georgetown University four years after leaving office, complaining that the Catalan government has relegated Castilian Spanish to the status of a ‘foreign language’ in the region’s schools, with ‘linguistic

commandoes' checking to see if Catalan is being used in the private sector since the 1998 introduction of a law giving preference to the language (Aznar 2008).

Using the PP as an example, Toubeau and Wagner (2013: 101) observe that cultural conservative parties 'generally praise traditional values such as "the nation", identify with a single national political community and regard the recognition of cultural diversity as a source of erosion of the integrity of the national community and democratic citizenship'. The party's focus on language policy is indicative of the importance of what could be seen as a culturally conservative issue, reflecting the PP's response to sub-state nationalism: the nation consists solely of Spain, with the 'historic nationalities' relegated to a lower status than that of nations. Critics see this as a Spain dominated by politics in Madrid as well as by the Castilian language and culture. They worry about an increase in 'Spanish nationalism', pointing out recent central government intentions to 'Spanish-ise' Catalan pupils by interfering with the region's bilingual education policy (Gardner 2012c). The PP's approach contrasts with the Conservative Party's acceptance of the UK as a multinational state in which Scotland, for example, is seen as a distinct nation within the larger entity of the UK, and where education policy in Scotland has been separate from that of England.

### **Decentralisation and the right**

Based on our analysis, we suggest three central conclusions about devolution and the centre right in the UK and Spain. First, there have been few attempts in the PP or the Conservative Party to discuss decentralisation in the context of conservative or liberal ideology. The market liberalism of the Conservative Party in the 1980s and 1990s was combined with an attachment to a strong state that could take on vested interests. It was therefore difficult for advocates of devolution to insinuate themselves into

debates about the best way to bring about economic revival. Only latterly, in 2014, did the Scottish Conservatives (with the UK party's blessing) begin to see the liberal advantages of devolving income tax to Scotland. This argument about responsibility also applied to the 2011 Welsh devolution referendum and the Conservative-led government's recent moves towards devolving more tax-raising powers to the Welsh Assembly. Similarly, it proved difficult to make a conservative case for devolution in the Conservative Party because of its longstanding ideological attachment to the Westminster model of British governance that implied parliamentary sovereignty and a centralised state. Although the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly essentially only added a democratic element to powers that were already devolved to the Welsh and Scottish Offices (often under Conservative governments), it still seemed to most of the party to be too revolutionary a change. Its unionism was based on Scotland and Wales having privileged access to the UK centre, rather than their own self-rule powers.

In Spain, the PP has recently been pushing for a more centralised state which it claims would be better able to handle the country's severe financial problems in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. Reducing power for the regional governments is being portrayed by the PP as a way to make Spain more 'viable', rather than experimenting with promoting fiscal responsibility through greater power transfers (with the hope that voters will hold regional governments to account, as the Conservatives are attempting in Scotland and Wales). While the PP was responsible for extending devolution of power to the autonomous communities in the past, this was done mainly in order to reduce the asymmetry in power that was seen as privileging the 'historic nationalities', something that worked against the PP's conservative view of Spain.

Thus, although some parties of the right may indeed be torn between on the one hand a commitment to free market economics and a conservative view of the state on the other, this need not necessarily be the case. In these two examples, the parties have at different times seen a strong central state as a prerequisite for the implementation of liberal economic policies. For the Conservatives under Thatcher, for instance, it is arguable that conservatism and liberalism were aligned with little outward contradiction.

Second, beyond ideology, issues of electoral politics and party management also play a role here. Even if the Conservatives had been persuaded by a liberal or conservative case for devolution, they would have had to confront the possibility that they would struggle to be in power in the new devolved institutions created. Electoral weakness therefore fed into concerns that Scottish and Welsh legislatures would roll back the hard-won economic achievements of the 1980s under centre-left governments. For the PP, however, early electoral successes in elections to the new autonomous communities allowed the party to come to accept, perhaps grudgingly, the ‘State of Autonomies’ that it (as the AP) had initially opposed. Because the party had become a major political actor in nearly all of Spain’s regions, there was no problem with its goal of extending devolution for the sake of reducing asymmetry across the autonomous communities because the party’s branches there would also benefit.

Third, times of economic crisis bring these issues to a head. In the 1980s, the Conservative Party felt that a strong lead from the centre was the only way to take on the vested interests that were holding back the UK economy and undermining parliamentary authority. In Spain, the PP has been using the current economic

problems to take control of regional finances, claiming that the ‘viability’ of the State of Autonomies is at stake.

In the wider study of decentralisation and party ideology, therefore, we have examined two potentially deviant cases. These parties’ positions on the economic right have led them to justify different policy directions on decentralisation at different times. Thus, it would be wrong to argue that the ideological logic of economic liberalism always tends towards support for decentralisation (or, at the very least, that it must always cause tensions or contradictions in centre-right parties). For some parties of the centre right, economic freedom must be imposed and protected by a strong central state that can effectively withstand the protests of special interests. Similarly, support for decentralisation from conservative parties might be entirely consistent with that ideology if it is an attempt (as in the case of the PP) to conceal the unique position of some sub-state regions. In short, cultural conservatism might be used to justify decentralisation and economic liberalism might equally be used to construct a case for something resembling a unitary state. Ideology is useful as a guide to the positions of centre-right parties, but it might be interpreted in unexpected ways.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has analysed how the Conservative Party and the PP deal with tensions in their ideological outlook when it comes to decentralisation. Having feared the potential threat to the state’s territorial integrity posed by decentralisation, the parties were forced to come to terms with the reality of this constitutional change. When difficult economic circumstances brought about austerity, however, the Conservatives came to support greater autonomy in order to promote fiscal responsibility, while the

PP went the other direction, attempting to re-centralise Spain in order to rein in what the party believed to be irresponsible spending. In both cases, fiscal responsibility in the face of economic problems was the prescription, but the outcomes were different. The Conservatives have come to accept decentralisation in the UK, not only in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but also in England, where they have been promoting the creation of 'city regions', while the PP has shifted from its record of greater decentralisation of power to Spain's regions to a policy of re-centralisation.

Toubeau and Wagner (2015: 115) are correct to note that analysis of party preferences on decentralisation need to go beyond the left-right dimension: the Conservatives and the PP are parties that combine centre-right economic views and cultural conservatism. However, we have also shown that these potentially conflicting ideologies do not always tilt these parties towards positions on decentralisation that we might expect. Further detailed case study research is required in order to determine whether the PP and the Conservatives are deviant cases or whether support for decentralisation is closely linked to a liberal economic outlook in parties of the centre right.



Table 1

	<i>Conservatism</i>	<i>Liberalism</i>
<i>State power</i>	Organic state development	Small state encourages personal freedom
<i>Economy</i>	The free market risks trampling on traditions	The market is the best way of allocating resources
<i>Decentralisation</i>	Decentralisation may risk destroying the inherited wisdom of the constitution	Fiscal and political responsibility could encourage lower taxes and greater efficiency

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from Spanish-language documents have been carried out by one of the authors.